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ABSTRACT

The process of figuring things out probably is more intriguing than anything else. Metaphor and memory contribute to the figuring out which is done in two personal essays: "Think about It" by Frank Conroy and "The Hidden Teacher" by Loren Eiseley. Metaphor and memory close distances between text and reader, and evoke conditions of intimacy essential in making the essays believable, meaningful, and persuasive. Knowledge comes, among other means, through metaphor and the authenticating act of memory, and in their essays Conroy and Eiseley reflect upon experiences in which knowledge builds accumulatively and moments in which it comes unexpectedly. Both write of experiences in which seemingly insignificant events provide them with insight into the human condition. In each case, the reader/student accesses personal memory to envision the experiences described, then must catch up with the description or the meaning is lost. Memory of past experience authenticates the meaning of metaphor. However, as Conroy observes, understanding does not always mean resolution. Sometimes, memory will enable the observer or reader to resolve the meanings of metaphors and sometimes it will not. If there were no puzzles to solve, there would be no need for metaphors. (SG)

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A RESOLVING KIND OF CLICK: LOREN EISELEY, FRANK CONROY AND "THE AUTHENTICATING ACT OF MEMORY"

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A RESOLVING KIND OF CLICK: LOREN EISELEY, FRANK CONROY AND "THE AUTHENTICATING ACT OF MEMORY"

THE PROCESS OF FIGURING things out intrigues us probably more than anything else in our lives, and I want to talk about how metaphor and memory contribute to the figuring out which is done in two peronal essays, "Think About It" by Frank Conroy and "The Hidden Teacher" by Loren Eiseley.

Drawing on a critical essay, "Metaphor and the Authenticating Act of Memory," [Tendril, 1984] by the poet and novelist Stephen Dobyns, I want to point out how metaphor and memory figure in thinking processes about which Conroy and Eiseley write. Metaphor and memory close distances between the texts and readers and evoke conditions of intimacy which are essential in making the essays believable, meaningful, and persuasive.

In both essays the writers establish sense that we are overhearing unique individuals trying to come to grips with difficult problems. The voices are different from our own. Overhearing others shifting and shuffling parts of a world and trying to combine those parts in ways which will make sense captivates us. At the same time though, the voices are familiar. We cannot mistake that the sense being sought has everything to do with us. The tension between

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difference and familiarity holds the essays in balance.

Focusing on poetry in his essay, Dobyns says this: "(I)f the poem is incapable of establishing an intimate relationship with its audience, then it simply isn't a poem" (195). The same can be said for a personal essay. Dobyns contends that one way a writer may strengthen the relationship with readers is through use of metaphor. "Another way," Dobyns writes, "is through the authenticating act of memory, which means that the reader must be able to recognize and respond to the world of the poem, which further requires a certain clarity as to the physical, emotional and intellectual contexts or situations to be found within the poem" (195).

Dobyns borrows stanzas from W.S. Merwin's Asian Figures, to illustrate how metaphor can help to establish intimacy with an audience. Here is one couplet, a simile, which Dobyns uses.

> Silent
> like the thief the dog bit (200)

"What I find particularly amazing," Dobyns says, "is the speed at which the mind comes up with the information" required to understand the content of the metaphor (200). Dobyns explains the process as follows.

> The question implied by the metaphor forces the reader to clarify and define the relationship between the object and the image, and this--one--forces the reader to participate actively in the poem and--two--gives him knowledge about something he did not know or only partly knew by making it analogous to something he can imagine.

> And this act of imagining increases (the reader's) participation by forcing him to draw on memory to authenticate the metaphor (200).

Here's the figure again:

Silent
like the thief the dog bit

We imagine a thief, committed to conceal his presence at any cost. We imagine the dog and the dog's teeth. We imagine the bit-back cry. Collecting the data, we re-member what we know about thieves and dogs and silence. All that we know clicks together. We experience surprise, understanding how the figure works. We are indebted to the writer for presenting us with the unusual combination of parts--silence, thief, dog--which, we discover, which makes sense only when we apply our own experience--memory--to understand.

"(T)he successful metaphor," Dobyns writes, "confronts the conscious with the unconscious mind and this results in a heightening of the reader's relationship with himself" (205). In many personal essays the tension upon which writers center is the same as the difference between that which is immediately perceived and that which is immanent yet beyond immediate understanding.

> (M)emory authenticates the metaphor and it is this authenticating act of memory which is the way the conscious mind is given a piece of information that already seems to exist in the unconscious (202).

"Mostly," Dobyns says, "knowledge comes to us accumulatively; it arrives word by word, in the way that words accumulate in a sentence. We build verbal structures of argument and persuasion" (203). But

knowledge also comes through metaphor and the authenticating act of memory, and in their essays Frank Conroy and Loren Eiseley reflect upon experiences where the process through which knowledge is acquired involves periods where knowledge builds accumulatively and moments where knowledge comes unexpectly. The tension between what is expected and what is unexpected is especially compelling.

Loren Eiseley's "The Hidden Teacher" may be found in a collection called The Unexpected Universe. In the essay Eiseley repeatedly focuses on moments where reports which he receives from the world baffle him. What he experiences is laden with meaning, but it is meaning which he cannot immediately express. Eiseley writes,

> We think we learn from teachers, and we sometimes do. But the teachers are not always to be found in school or in great laboratories. Sometimes what we learn depends upon our own powers of insight. Moreover, our teachers may be hidden, even the greatest teacher (49).

An example of how Eiseley learned through his own powers of insight--or seemingly spontaneous non-verbal perception--involves an orb spider. Coming upon an elaborate web, Eiseley touches a strand with a pencil desiring to see how the architect will respond. Eiseley's commentary follows.

> A pencil point was an intrusion into this universe for which no precedent existed. Spider was circumscribed by spider ideas; its universe was spider universe. All outside was irrational, extraneous. . . . I realized that in the world of spider I did not exist (50).

Foregrounding his reflective stance, Eiseley spans many years to fix himself in the present when he writes, "A message has arisen only

now from the misty shreds of that webbed universe. What was it that had so troubled me about the incident" with the orb spider (51)? Eiseley decides after many years that "The spider was a symbol of man in miniature" (53). Just as the spider was circumscribed by spider ideas, human beings are circumscribed by human ideas. With the completion of the metaphor, Eiseley is able to ask: "What is it we are part of that we do not see, as the spider was not gifted to discern my face, or my little probe into her world" (54)? Reviewing our own knowledge or memories of spiders and yoking it with Eiseley's observations, we participate in the process, discovering as Eiseley discovers how spiders provide commentary on human beings.

Another moment in "The Hidden Teacher" involves remembrance of a pupil who appeared one day in a mathematics classroom were Eiseley too was a pupil. With the principal of the school and several teachers on hand as witnesses, the student works out at the board advanced equations far beyond the understanding of his peers. Once the student is ushered away, everyone else in the room is chastened by the announcement that they should work harder. Reading as we read, accumulatively, guiding ourselves according to the verbal structures of argument and persuasion, we naturally wonder What is the point? We ask the same question of lines in Merwin's Asian Figures, seeking completion, some meaningful sense. Eiseley's appraisal of the event follows.

> Long after, looking back from maturity, I realized. . . . I had been the fortunate witness to life's unbounded creativity--a creativity seemingly still as unbalanced and chance-filled as in that far era when a black scaled creature had broken from an egg

> and the age of the giant reptiles, the creatures of the prime, had tentatively begun (58).

The way is open then for the crucial assertion: that we should not allow empirical science or what we might call accumulative knowledge to be our only way of seeing. Rather, Eiseley says, "Great art may emerge without warning from the soundless depths of the unconscious, just as supernovae may blaze up suddenly in the farther reaches of void space" (64). If it is a leap at all, it is only a tiny leap to say that Eiseley's hidden teacher is metaphor, or whatever it is in the human mind, the tension between the conscious and the unconscious perhaps, that surprises us with our own capacities to understand what this means, for instance:

> The hissing starts
> in the free seats

Understanding both cosmic and personal creativity to be unbalanced at times and chance-filled, we contemplate the sources of metaphor and the expectancies we feel when we face compelling mysteries.

In "Think About It" Frank Conroy repeatedly depicts himself in moments where reports which he receives from the world require more of him than he can immediately understand. Three anecdotes constitute the piece. The first anecdote involves two old black men who ran a shoeshine stand in the New York subway station where Conroy sold hot dogs. "(T)hey never looked at anything in their immediate vicinity,"

Conroy writes.

The men always stared into some distance which Conroy, who was sixteen at the time, could not define. "(T)he staring off, the long, steady staring off . . . had me hypnotised," Conroy explains. "I left for a better job, with handshakes from both of them, without understanding what I had seen" (38). Dobyns says, "It is (the) act of questioning that seems to submit the conscious to the unconscious mind, expecting the unconscious immediately to authenticate and understand" (202). Conroy raises the question, What does the black men's staring mean? Readers anticipate that the staring will mean something; however, the meaning is not immediately disclosed. We have to wait as Conroy, like Eiseley, draws parts together, assembling a figure not as compressed as figures in Merwin's book though, a figure which, nevertheless, produces metaphor-like effects.

A decade later, after playing jazz with black musicians in Harlem and hanging out and learning how people "help themselves get through life in the ghetto" (38), Conroy says a connection came.

> Only then did I understand the two shoeshine men. They were trapped in a demeaning situation in a dark corner in an underground corridor in a filthy subway system. Their continuous staring off was . . . a kind of dance. Our bodies are here, went the statement, but our souls are receiving nourishment from distant sources only we can see (38).

Conroy had as it were to catch up with his memory in order to understand the shoeshine men, and readers must, of course, run the course with Conroy. Because Conroy, like Eiseley, compresses time in his essay, the narrative moments spent as Conroy presents his readers with a problem and then poses a solution are so few readers must

process information quickly. Where years were required for Conroy to understand, understanding is conveyed to readers in moments. Following the narrative, we access personal memory as we envision experiences which Conroy describes. We link together Conroy's comments on the action, and once the figure is complete, we must catch up too, or the meaning is lost. Conroy accelerates the process of understanding. Dobyns says the following.

> Every metaphor is based on buried or withheld information which the comparison implied by the metaphor attempts to discover. Implied in each metaphor is the question how the image is like the object. It is by answering this question that the reader becomes a participant in the poem by authenticating the comparison from his own memory (199).

My point is of course that we answer the same kinds of questions through the authenticating act of memory when we read personal essays. Only after Conroy has accumulated additional experience can he understand, remembering the shoeshine men and their staring off and fitting newly acquired experience into the equation. "The light bulb may appear over your head," Conroy writes, "But it may be a while before it actually goes on" (38).

Of another experience where after a long time Conroy finally understands and masters an elusive jazz chord, Conroy explains, "I had remembered what I hadn't understood, you might say, until my life caught up with the information and the light bulb went on" (39). Whether the light bulb goes on almost instantaneously as when we understand the content of a metaphor like this one--

Rank and position
gulls on water

or if the moment of illumination comes only after years carrying around half of the figure--the "object" or the "vehicle"--trying to understand where it might fit into our lives, the process is essentially the same. Our memories are always active as we compare new experiences with old ones. We know that resemblances which turn up just might resolve some old, persistent question, and personal essays often deal with this basic human experience. In Eiseley's and Conroy's essays, participating in thinking processes with the writers, we feel intimately connected to minds which resemble our own in as much as the thinking processes depend on metaphor and the authenticating act of memory.

We become so involved in the thinking, in the play of metaphors and memory, that as Dobyns says about good metaphors, "(T)here (are) moment(s) of combined knowing and not-knowing where we [like writers] confront ourselves" (202).

In the end in "Think About It" Conroy discloses that he has not yet comprehended the meaning of the third experience about which he writes--his role as a messenger in an informal legal-constitutional discussion between Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas and Judge Learned Hand. But not comprehending and the concomitant sense of expectation or hope that accompanies not understanding--like the moment of expectation which we experience when confronted by a

metaphor--makes all of the difference as Conroy explains.

> For me, the magic dance of the shoeshine men was the kind of experience in which understanding came with a kind of click, a resolving kind of click. The same with the experience at the piano. What happened with Justice Douglas and Judge Hand was different, and makes the point that understanding does not always mean resolution. Indeed, in our intellectual lives, our creative lives, it is perhaps those problems that will never resolve that rightly claim the lion's share of our energies. The physical body exists in a constant state of tension as it maintains homeostasis, and so too does the active mind embrace the tension of never being certain, never being absolutely sure, never being done, as it engages the world. That is our special fate, our inexpressibly valuable condition (43).

The worlds with which we are intimate are puzzles which at times will click together like a metaphor will click when we remember the metaphor's parts. Other times, no click will fill the empty space. If all the empty spaces were filled up though, we would have no use for metaphors. We would not have to remember what we do not know. The exigencies which keep us alive would be exigencies no longer. We would not have to think. There would be no reason to write or reason to read essays like "The Hidden Teacher" or "Think About It."

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